

Indelibly Stamped

Lessons learned from Mr. James “Jimmy” Stamp

“Hold the mouthpiece with the thumb and index finger of your left hand” was one of the first things I heard from a short stocky man with a gentle voice. The year was 1965. The place was Hollywood, California. James Stamp was not an obscure teacher even back then. But something was happening and it was starting to get people’s attention. His students were starting to make a name for themselves. Tom Stevens became the assistant first trumpet player in the L. A. Philharmonic at that time and soon after became the associate. It wasn’t too long after this that Malcolm McNabb started doing well in the studios. He has reached legend status with all the movies he has played first on. With more and more students wanting lessons, Stamp rented a studio in Glendale where he taught for many years. Today, his methods are taught all over the world because other notable students like Roy Poper (Oberlin) and Boyd Hood (USC) have passed on Stamp’s methods to their students.

Books can be purchased on his methods, so what I am going to pass on are some valuable insights learned during my lessons with Jimmy Stamp that can be applied to any kind of playing.

Why the left hand? It was the weaker of the two, and it would not allow me to put too much pressure on the lips. In this way, only two things could be used to produce a sound, the air and the lips. Stamp sat behind a small grand piano and played each note I buzzed on the keyboard making sure that my attack, pitch and sound were correct for each note. I was 15 at the time and that was over 50 years ago. To this day, I still start my practice session with the mouthpiece. I start relaxed and right off the bat, it gets me listening to what I’m playing. He would tell me, “If you can play a passage on the mouthpiece, you can play it on the trumpet.” In reality, it was easier on the trumpet.

Stamp was inspiring as a teacher. He got such enjoyment out of having a student leave his lesson a better player than when he arrived. He inspired his students to go home and practice. Not all of his lessons went according to plan. I might show

up and after a short warm up, play duets (or trios if Stamp joined in) with the student who preceded me. Sometimes, I might stay after and play with the next student. One time Roy Poper showed up, unscheduled, and I knew my lesson was over. Roy, who teaches at Oberlin College today, was a successful trumpet player in the LA area and an excellent musician. Playing trios with those two was a great memory because they had fun playing and that was contagious. Stamp knew how to make playing fun.

It wasn't just Stamp's warm-up routines. It was how he wanted us to play those routines that was important. It all started with the attack. It needed to be clean. If it wasn't, he had me playing one note at a time for the next part of my lesson until the attack was what he expected. The sound was immediate after the attack and the pitch needed to be correct. Second, the note needed to be centered. When that happened the bell would resonate and he taught us to listen for that sound. If the sound was too pinched, the pitch was too high, and he generally heard that before I did. If the sound was too airy, he would have me play soft to get a clear sound. An airy sound would often be the result of too much marching band playing! The goal was to get a full sound in all registers with as little effort as possible.

After the mouthpiece, the warm-up consisted of playing down into the pedal range and back up again, so that when I finished I would end up having played over three octaves in one breath. Again, the goal was to make sure the higher range sounded just as full as the lower notes. This particular routine can often be heard when a group of musicians are warming up in LA.

I don't know if it was just me, but I have some phrases etched in my mind because Stamp would tell them to me repeatedly. One was, "Stay down going up." He knew I had a tendency to start playing sharp going up to a high note. I would cut off the air with my throat and start pinching the sound. If I concentrated on making sure the air was moving and I didn't tighten up too soon, the top note was much easier to play. Often, he would have me concentrate on making sure the note before the highest one was played correctly. That really helped. Likewise he would say, "Stay up going down". This was mainly to keep the diaphragm tight as you played downward. Many times, I would get the high note, then miss the one

after it because I would relax too much (and of course stop blowing). If I kept my diaphragm 'set' once I got high, going down and coming back up was much easier. He would always remind me to start a note in this order: Place the mouthpiece on the lips, take a slow deep breath, put air behind the tongue (which is behind the teeth), and finally add needed pressure to play the note. I still catch myself reversing the last two in that sequence.

If you studied with Stamp for any length of time, you got really good at holding the top note of any phrase. He liked us to play some kind of vocal-like piece that had a lot of slurring. I still know the first couple of lines of one because we played it so often. He would have me hold the top note until he said to go, then I would continue to the next top note of a phrase and hold that one. It was a great way to practice pieces to make sure I was centered on all the higher notes.

When I decided to try and make it as trumpet player, I was out of college. That's too late! I went on the road with a show band for nine months and then played in Las Vegas for six months. I would practice whenever I could, which was not enough. I developed bad habits and my mouthpiece started moving over to the right of center. My sound got very thin up high and I had very little endurance. To play high, I changed to an upstream embouchure. Like an idiot, I had totally abandoned Stamp's teachings. When I came back to LA, it was like starting to play all over again. I ended up quitting the trumpet for about three months. Then one day I picked up the horn and it sounded pretty good. When I went to see Stamp, I was embarrassed, but he was just glad to see me and started helping me get back to playing again.

As a non-professional player, I found I could not do the Stamp warm-up all the time or that would be my only playing for the day. Also, I had played the warm-up for so long, I stopped listening while I played and my mind would wander. I think Stamp was always trying to improve the routine through the years. It had changed from when I started to when I stopped taking lessons from him. I shortened the warm-up to some long tones and Clarke-like scale patterns.

About 15 years ago, I was asked to teach some students at a local college. By now, I was self employed and could arrange my schedule to accommodate both

teaching and work. What I ended up doing for my students has helped me more than anything else I have done. I wanted my students to learn these Stamp lessons, but by playing different exercises and not just one routine. Essentially, it's playing a Schlossberg-type long tone phrase for a minute or two on the mouthpiece, then repeating it on the trumpet with a few more long tone phrases added on expanding the range to one octave. Next, I had them play a Stamp-like arpeggio downward, ending on a pedal 'C'. Once they felt relaxed and centered, I had them play major scales. The first note had to be clear and centered (sound familiar?). Then they held the top note the first time, repeated the top two notes several times the second time, and then played the scale "as is" several more times. If every note was clear and full going up and down, they would move up to the next scale.

The image shows two musical exercises for trumpet. The first exercise is in 2/4 time, marked "4-8 x's" and "mp", featuring a long tone phrase with a slur and a crescendo. The second exercise is in 4/4 time, marked "3" and "mp", featuring a triplet of eighth notes followed by a downward arpeggio and a final note marked "mp".

When they got up to F#, I added the second lower octave to keep the lips flexible. The routine kept ascending until the sound started to thin out and was followed by a short break. This is not a warm-up routine per se, but the student would get noticeable stronger if they did it correctly. Once the student was familiar with the major scale pattern, I had them learn a chord pattern. Eventually, they learned major, minor and chromatic scales, along with major, minor, diminished and augmented chord patterns. Stamp wanted me to learn scales and chords so that when I was sight reading, I would recognize the pattern and my eyes could look ahead to see what was next. With these exercises, the valuable lesson was passed on.

Until about ten years ago, I didn't play much first trumpet but I am playing more first parts than ever these days. Why at my advanced age? One reason is that I retired about six years ago and have been able to practice more. But more importantly, I applied these lessons learned from an excellent teacher, and hope Jimmy Stamp would be pleased if he was still here to listen to me play today.

David Johns Bio:

Studied trumpet with Tom Scott, Tom Stevens, Jimmy Stamp and John Clyman

Bachelors degree at California State University at Northridge '72

Toured in a show band in '73

Worked in Las Vegas in '74

Masters degree in Trumpet at USC '77

Computer Learning Center Certificate '81

Formed DJ Concepts computer consulting '85

Played around LA mostly in community orchestras, performed in 100's of weddings. and a few recording sessions

Played trumpet in the Grace Community Church orchestra and brass ensemble from '79 - '15

Formed Tower Brass Quintet after retiring from the computer business in '09

James Stamp Bio:

James "Jimmy" Stamp grew up in Rochester Minnesota.

Played with the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra until the late '40s.

Moved to Hollywood, California and played with several radio shows.

After a heart attack in 1954, he played less and began teaching more.

Moved his studio from Hollywood to Glendale, California in the late '60s because of his popularity as a teacher.

He is famous for his warm-up and the many brass players who have credited Stamp for the excellent teaching they received.

He died on December 22, 1985.